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ABSTRACT

In exploring the formal and informal role of student government in college organization and how that role differs in small community colleges, two different models for student government operation are reviewed: a power-driven organization that describes the status quo and a purpose-driven organization that illustrates options available to college administrators. The power-driven organization is a pyramid with the governing board at the top holding ultimate authority and dispensing power downwards. In such a system, the student government rests at the bottom and has virtually no responsibility. With such limited authority student governments tend to invent functions as entrees to power. Natural student frustrations are magnified so that self-interest and informal veto powers are called into every judgment. The purpose-driven organizational model directly opposes the power-driven model in that it relates to organizational dynamics rather than to structure. In such an organization, student government exists as a partner with other governing units working toward the institutional purpose, has definite authority and partnership responsibilities, shares in administrative planning, and directs student opinions on-campus. The challenges of accountability and change agent roles in a purpose-driven organization are also explored. A selected bibliography is included. (TR)

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THE ROLE OF STUDENT GOVERNMENT IN THE SMALL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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THE ROLE OF STUDENT GOVERNMENT

IN THE SMALL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

An often repeated cliche among faculty members is that a college would be a great place to live and work if it were not for the students. It would also be possible to say that some administrators feel as if a college would be a great place to live and work if it were not for student government. At least there should be some explanation for the perennial question, "What is the legitimate role of student government in a small community college?"

Two biases are evident in the discussion. First, the use of the word "legitimate" implies that student government can also be "illegitimate." The suspicion arises that "legitimate" is the netherland of informal power which the students can control by influencing the climate of the campus. Is, then, a student government illegitimate when it acts as a veto group from self-interest? Research suggests these characteristics are not uncommon for student governments (Harris, 1970, pp. 120-145). A second bias is introduced in the topic when the term "small community" is added as adjectives modifying college. This term carries the weight of a formal relationship in an institution, perhaps through the public charter, or the statement of educational philosophy. For most, however, the claim of a small community college also includes a quality of life on campus that eludes legal or academic terms. Edward Eddy described this quality of life as a "mist that fills the air" (Eddy, 1974, pp. 181-193). He stated that the students may not be fully aware of the mist while they are in it, but before long they are thoroughly drenched. As an integral part of the mist,

it is expected that student government in a small college will be different in climate, if not in organization.

This relatively simple topic then evolves into more complex subsets:

1. What is the formal and informal role of student government in college organization?
2. How does the role of student government differ in a small community college?
3. Can a working model be developed for student government in small community colleges?

To address these questions, two different models of student government will be proposed. The first is a power-driven organization that describes the status quo. The second is a purpose-driven organization that illustrates options available to administrators of community colleges.

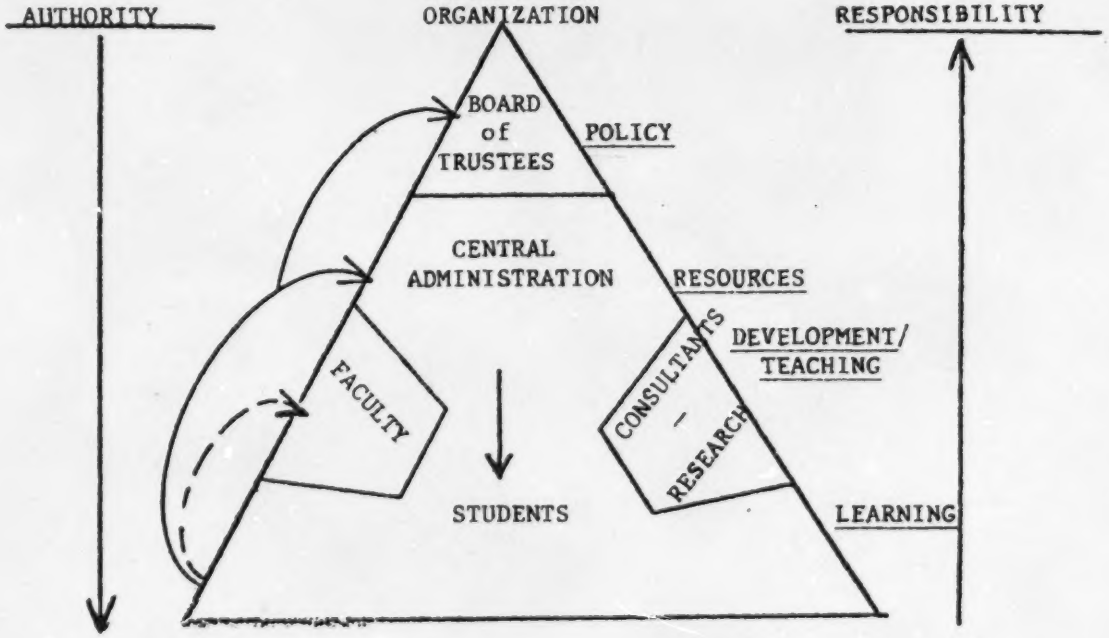
POWER-DRIVEN ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL

Institutions must be organized for the effective and efficient allocation of resources in order to achieve their goals (Carnegie Commission, 1972, pp. 128-142). A hierarchy based upon the delegation of authority and responsibility is necessary for any organization (Drucker, 1974, pp. 372-384). Contrary to popular opinion, institutions and organizations are neither good nor evil. Like people, their purposes can be perverted by self-serving ends (Kast, 1970, pp. 240-241). In an original state, all institutions exist to serve the structure. When this happens institutions require major changes or realignment of purpose. To insure cohesive goals, constrant reevaluation and clarification need to be ingrained into the structure. A constant evaluation process is the best means to protect an organization from the temptation to serve the structure rather than people (Mayhew, 1970, pp. 37-40).

Institutions are organized to achieve a purpose as well as serve people (Powell, 1971, p. 73). Yet, it seems to be endemic in organizational behavior to shift from purpose to power as the motivating force for individual participation in the institution. A study of college and university governments shows that when power is shared, all of the participating parties feel more powerless (Baldridge, 1971, pp. 135-137). Evidently, power is like a pie of given circumference. To share means that someone loses and someone gains (Schenkel, 1971, p. 23). Still, no one is satisfied. He who lost a piece wants it returned; he who gains a piece wants more. Acceptable or not, it is a fact that power is the fuel that runs institutions, including the small community college.

A power-driven organization is a pyramid (Figure 1). At the top is the governing board which has the ultimate authority and responsibility for the policy of the institution. As the pyramid widens, authority is delegated to the president or chief executive officer. In turn, he delegates

Figure 1
POWER-DRIVEN
ORGANIZATION



authority to other administrators, if he follows the principle that authority should flow to function. As president, he retains the responsibility to the governing board for the implementation of board policies through functions which are performed by others.

The president and his administrators have the primary responsibility for the development and allocation of resources, including funds, faculty, facilities, time, and knowledge. At the third level, faculty appear--people to whom the governing board, through the administration, delegates authority to carry out the primary function of the curriculum. By definition, the curriculum is to include all of the teaching-learning experiences of the student. In fulfilling its function, the faculty has responsibility to the administration for the effective and efficient use of allocated resources.

At the base of the pyramid are the students who are primarily responsible for learning. Their position in the hierarchy accounts for the fact that they are variously called the "raw material," "subjects," "products," and "consumers" of the teaching-learning process (Carnegie Commission, 1972). Theoretically, the institution exists primarily to serve students.

One exception has been built into the neat layers of the power-driven organization. In larger institutions, teaching and learning have tended to be reduced to the intellective or cognative functions fueled and fostered by scientism and secular humanism. Emotional, volitional, and moral aspects of the teaching-learning process have been removed from the pyramid. Although small community colleges have not defaulted in their responsibility for the total student, there has been a tendency for the faculty to reduce the curriculum to its intellective component and shift responsibility for social and moral learning to the administration (Nichols,

1970, pp. 35-42). In the model, there is a break in the layers suggesting the involvement of the administration in the living-learning experience of students.

Three factors account for the break in the organizational hierarchy. First, faculty of small institutions are tempted to follow their colleagues in larger universities and seek a professional identity within narrow, intellectual limits. Second, teaching of the total student, social and moral, is much more difficult than academic content. Objectives are not clear, methods are not defined, and grading is impossible. Third, authority and responsibility lines are twisted in the relationship of teaching to the total student. Faculties seek selective authority over certain aspects of student life, but seldom want the responsibility for follow-up, evaluation, and reporting. Administrators, then, have been made accountable for non-intellective learning on the campuses. Their methods of teaching by procedural controls, student life regulations, or by gentle persuasion may be equally ineffective. But, in the confusion, there is no choice. As victims, they see the artificial segregation of their learning experiences and react against it. As culprits, they are quick to re-enforce the segregation as they submit to an authoritarian classroom, but resist guidance as well as control in the larger living-learning context. Student governments mirror this dichotomy when they tend to choose the administration as their target for power and avoid confrontation with the faculty.

The dynamics of the power-driven organization model help explain some of the role-conflicts of student government. In a hierarchy, authority is delegated downward. Responsibility cannot be delegated. It is subject to a reverse gravitational pull, even when authority is delegated downward. Students are at the bottom of the authority line. After the pieces of power have been distributed at the higher levels, little is left. However, the

responsibility is also minimal at the student level. It is realistic to say that students have little authority and little responsibility in an organizational hierarchy. Their response through student government are consistent with the position as "low man on the totem pole." With limited authority, student government tends to invent functions as entrees to power, or to look for pieces of power lying around unclaimed (Drucker, 1974, pp. 472-475). In their frustration, they usually fail and return to revising their constitution, or to spinning the wheels of social programs. Their other alternative is to fight for power in the hierarchy. When this stance is assumed, student government takes on the characteristics of a beleaguered minority seeking compensatory justice. Student self-interests become the motive that guides the group. Policies, programs, procedures, and people are judged by whether or not they advance their self-interests (McGrath, 1971, pp. 83-84). As an expression of that viewpoint, student government becomes a "veto group" on the campus, reacting negatively, not against the substance of issues, but against the point of power where the decision was made. Like an oppressed minority, students do not strike out at the real source of their powerlessness, namely the class just above them--the faculty (Mariubu, 1974, p. 192). Consciously or unconsciously, they know that faculty members are like the hard hats of labor. They carry big sticks of academic sanctions and do not hesitate to use them (Powell, p. 68). So, like other minorities, the students take on the class one or two levels removed from them. In this case, it is the administration. This is a conscious choice, not only because they assume that this is where the power lies, but also because they know they will get a more sympathetic ear for their protest. With a bit of encouragement, they will also call for power in policy decisions (McGrath, 1971) with the board of trustees, but not usually with success because they tend to be dealing with a corporate mind in which power levels are stratified and seldom crossed.

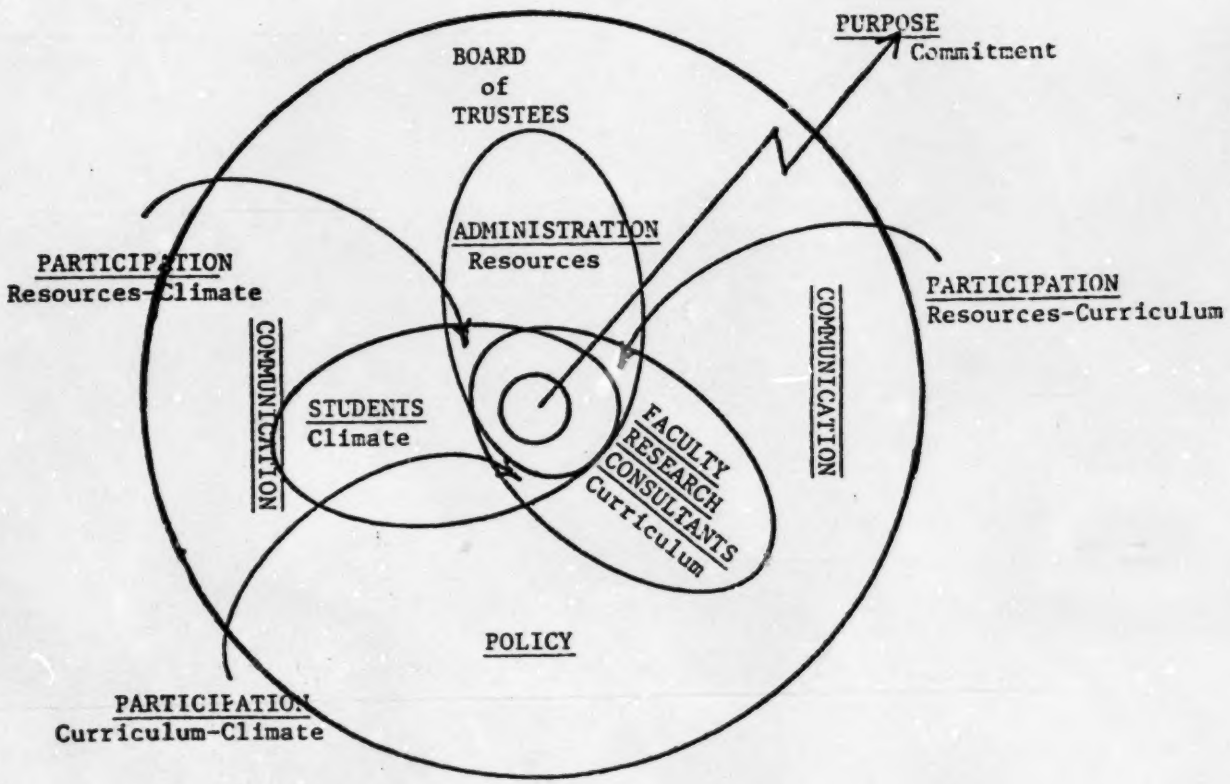
A power-driven organization is a natural breeder of conflict when the lines of authority and responsibility are rigidly held. Under these circumstances, the role of student government is severely limited in function, authority, and responsibility. But, the instant the system is opened up, confusion is added to conflict. Power without responsibility is held out sometimes and withdrawn at others. Natural student frustrations are magnified so that self-interest and informal veto powers are called into every judgment. When student government in a small community college assumes this role, relationships are stalemated as power standoffs and the process become more important than the results (Bell, 1971, p. 158). Despite what the catalog may say about "total education of the complete self" in the community college, if the internal dynamics of governance are power-driven, a subversion has taken place. To recover identity of purpose, the power-driven organization must be traded for its purpose-driven counterpart.

PURPOSE-DRIVEN ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL

Opposition to the power-driven model is justifiable. The nature of the criticism, however, should apply to the dynamics of organization when power is the motivating force. If the lines of authority and responsibility are abandoned along with the power-drive, an organizational anarchy takes over (Dressel, 1970, pp. 87-91). Definitive lines of authority and responsibility cannot be forfeited without sacrificing efficiency in the allocation of resources and effectiveness of goal achievement (Le Breton, 1968, p. 27). Therefore, every person in a community college, whether they be administrator, faculty member, student, or staff, has a personal stake in the quality of organization and management as defined by the lines of authority and responsibility.

The primary problem is related to the dynamics of an organization rather than its structure. Small community colleges claim to be driven by purpose, not power. If this is so, the roles of the governing units within the organization are purpose-driven. In this case, purpose is used to identify the mission and objectives of the institution. Assuming the purposes are known and operable, they can then determine the dynamics of the organization. If they are hidden, ill-defined, or unaccepted, the internal dynamics of organization will naturally degenerate into structural protectionism and power struggles. Further, assuming that purposes determine the dynamics of organization in a small community college, a purpose-driven organizational model is the starting point for the introduction of change (Figure 2).

Figure 2
PURPOSE-DRIVEN
ORGANIZATION



Without violating the principles of management by authority and responsibility and without changing the primary functions of the governing units, the purpose-driven organization implies the following concepts of institutional structure:

1. Trustees have the primary authority and responsibility for institutional policy, but enjoin representatives of the other governing units in purpose-related planning through open, multi-channel communication.

2. Administration has the primary authority and responsibility for resource development, but share that function with the faculty for curriculum and with the student for climate by two-way participation in planning decisions.

3. The faculty and other resources have the primary responsibility for the curriculum (total living-learning experiences), but share that function with the administration for resources and with students for climate by bilateral interaction in planning decisions.

4. Students have the primary responsibility for the climate (living-learning environment), but share that function with the administration for resources and with the faculty for the curriculum by the bilateral planning process.

Models are oversimplified. Functions are never as clear-cut as single words and relationships are never as direct as black lines. But the blurs and overlaps do not nullify the need. If all of the governing units of a small community college are formally and informally committed to a common purpose, the dynamics should be more free and open than they are in a power-driven organization.

Some risky changes are presupposed in the purpose-driven organization. Student government is the case-in-point. In a purpose-driven organization, the role of student government would be defined by the following principles:

1. Primary Purpose. Student government exists as a partner with other governing units in order to achieve the institutional purpose. Its constitution, by-laws, organization, leadership, priorities, and programs must be guided by that goal. Students should have a voice in decisions or changes in the institutional purpose, particularly as the changes may affect their

welfare. Any student-sponsored proposals for changes in institutional purpose should follow organizational lines. This implies that students be included in long-range planning.

2. Organizational Relationship. Authority and responsibility lines must be followed by student government in order to maintain the clarity of relationships within which communication and participation can be achieved between students and other governing units. An organizational chart should show the lines of authority, responsibility, and relationship for all the governing units.

3. Institutional Policy. Student government must operate within the legal, financial, and public institutional guidelines established by the institution's governing board. Bilateral communication through appropriate channels should be operated between the trustees and student government. Policy changes should be communicated to students and, where their welfare is concerned, provision made for the expression of the student viewpoint. Student observers with voice, but no vote, may be invited to participate in board meetings.

4. Governance Partnership. As a legitimate governing unit, student government has partnership responsibilities with the administration, faculty, and staff. This implies a two-way communication, participation in areas of mutual concern, and avoidance of the "we-they" splits. The student body president may be a voting member of the president's advisory cabinet and equal student representation may sit on governance councils comprised of other elements of the institution.

5. Shared Responsibilities. Students should share in the planning for administrative decisions on resources related to climate (student activities and learning) and for faculty decisions on curriculum related to climate. Implementation of these decisions should be carried on within the separate administrative units with communication to student government. There may be student representatives on standing and policy committees or task forces in administrative and faculty areas (and vice versa).

6. Primary Responsibility. Student government is primarily responsible for the student climate of the campus. The quality of its representation in the governance of the educational community, its leadership, its social, moral, and intellectual programs, and communication system determines the extent to which it contributes to the institutional goals. The quality of student government in these areas determines whether or not an informal and usually counter-climate develops as a major force in student life. Student government now tends to tinker with the machinery of its own system, seek increased power, and lobby for student self-interests. Utilizing a purpose-driven organization, the focus for its attention should be programs for meeting student needs by setting the tone for activities and learning in accord with institutional purposes.

A purpose-driven organizational model in a small, community college poses two unmet challenges. First, there is the unspoken challenge of accountability. Accountability systems are being required at all levels of institutional governance--student government should not be an exception (Le Breton, p. 29). Although it might be argued that annual elections represent accountability, experience dictates this is not the case. New accountability lines must be developed through administrators, just as all other governing units have personal lines of responsibility. Accountability applies to organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting, and budgeting as well as planning. Advisors to student government have the responsibility of serving as resource people for the evaluation of these functions and an administrator has the responsibility of serving as the point of that accountability. The administration and faculty should view their roles more as an educational task than an administrative one. The line of authority can be dispatched in proportion to the amount of accountability that is built into the system; of course, no further than the purposes and policies that define the institution.

Accountability is more than reporting to an administrator. Its full meaning is realized when the performance of the governing units is evaluated by the members of the external community according to institutional purposes and goals. Few, if any, student leaders and governments have initiated their own evaluation process (McGrath, 1971). If legitimacy and stature is the goal of student government, its most significant step would be to submit its programs to the constructive review of its peers at a minimum of one time each year.

A second challenge that is implied, but not specified in the purpose-driven organization, is the role of student government as a change agent. In the power-driven model, change is presumably affected by gaining power at the levels of policy formation and resource allocation, or by

exercising political pressure (Powell, p. 37). These tactics have failed to change higher education. Agents of change are most successful when they use the dynamics of the system (Drucker, p. 782). In the purpose-driven model, student government is an acknowledged partner in administration because its goal is the achievement of the institutional mission. Student perspective is then valued in planning institutional policies. Student participation is accepted in setting resource and curriculum priorities. Studies in higher education show that the climate of a higher education institution is a more potent agent of change than formal power itself (Valdez, p. 127). Student governments have far more potential power than they claim; they have yet to find and organize it.

The role of student government, then, is to serve as an active, participating element of the institutional team representing the student population in the planning, resource allocation, organization, implementation, and evaluation of objectives directly related to their efforts to meet institutional goals and missions. By this inclusion in the implementation and operation of the institution by a purpose-centered organization, a more complete unity of institutional mission may be achieved. This mission of "total education" may in reality be operationalized.

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